

SELECTION AND TRAINING OF GUIDE DOGS FOR THE
BLIND by J.K. Holdsworth

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SELECTION AND TRAINING OF GUIDE DOGS FOR THE BLIND

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There is long historical evidence of the association between dogs and blind people, but the first specific attempt to train dogs to lead blind persons was not made until about 1917 by members of the German War Dog School in Potsdam, Germany.

This was seen, recognised and expanded by an American lady, Mrs. Eustis, who had already a large German Shepherd breeding establishment in Switzerland. Mrs. Eustis established a school for guide dog trainers, Eustis (1931), from which four men ultimately qualified, going to America, Italy and England. She then transferred her activities to the United States and founded the Seeing Eye Organisation, from which has developed the widely known and successful Guide Dog Movement.

The guide dog movement was introduced to Australia in 1950 by a man named Arnold Cook who lost his sight at the age of eighteen, but who subsequently graduated from the Western Australia University and went to England for post-graduate work. Whilst in England he trained with a guide dog there and brought this dog back with him to Australia, thus becoming the first guide dog owner in Australia.

The first Training Centre was established in Perth in 1951 (Hasluck 1967). Due to an ever increasing demand for guide dogs, a decision was made to expand the movement on a National basis and to establish a Training Centre in Melbourne. By 1962 this new Training Centre had been completed, built on six and one half acres of land in Kew donated by the Victorian Government. The Association is now national, with a state office and Association staff in each capital city.

The service to all visually impaired persons is provided free of cost. This includes travel cost from any point in Australia to the Training Centre in Melbourne, full board and lodging and, of course, the allocation of a fully trained dog and the person's own tuition over a period of approximately four weeks. Although the guide dog owner is responsible for the maintenance of his dog, members of the Australian Veterinary Association have been particularly generous providing their services, usually without cost, to blind people who have bona fide guide dogs.

Following some years of negotiations, a blind person and his guide dog may now travel freely throughout the country, entering public places and travelling in all forms of public transport including aircraft.

The Association trains its own staff to internationally accepted standards over a three year course. During this time, each trainer must have trained a minimum of twenty-five successful man/dog pairs, and have passed a series of theoretical examinations. These examinations cover not only the theory of animal training and human instruction, but also social welfare. The instructor must not only be a good dog handler, but should have the understanding, experience and ability to adequately instruct blind people. The whole of this work is a part of the total rehabilitative process designed to enable a handicapped person to live a full life within the community.

Not every blind person is able to work with a guide dog. The very old and the very young are usually excluded, and some blind people with additional handicaps may also be unsuitable. Obviously, not every blind person is a dog lover, but a natural affection for dogs is basic to successful work with a guide dog. A confidential interview is carried out between the instructor and blind person at the time of application for a guide dog.

The dog's essential task is to lead a blind person safely, selecting routes to avoid the blind person bumping into people or obstacles. The dog stops at each down-kerb, waiting for the command to proceed given by the owner. This command must only be accepted if the way is clear. The work demands an extremely high degree of concentration, as the dog should not be distracted by other animals, sounds, sights, or scents. Although obedient, the dog must also use initiative. He should be bold yet friendly, showing no signs of nervousness or aggression. He should be willing and energetic enough to work to the limit of what a blind person may require, but at the same time be steady enough in temperament to be happy in lying beside its owner whilst at work for fairly long periods during the day.

During the dog's initial testing period he is checked on some sixteen different points, which include the degree of

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nervousness or suspicion which may be present in the dog, and an assessment of the capacity of its concentration, willingness and any degree of distraction is noted. The dog's hearing and body sensitivity, initiative and temperamental stability are also scaled. These classifications have been devised purely for the use of the Training Centre, and do not necessarily refer to similar scientifically accepted terms. The dog must, of course, be completely physically fit, and must be a good representative of his type. Blind people are appreciative of the quality and appearance of their dogs. Dogs found to be unsuitable are returned to the puppy walkers or found other suitable homes.

All dogs used come through the Association's breeding and Puppy Walking programme. The selective breeding and Puppy Walking programme has been responsible for raising the success rating of dogs for training. Because the training of the dog does not commence until it is twelve months old, they are boarded out at the age of eight weeks under the Puppy Walking programme, in which people look after and handle these dogs, under the Association's supervision, until the dog is old enough to commence training.

Having been accepted, dogs go into a four to five month training period before entering the final training stage, when both blind person and dog are trained together. The dog's training is built up gradually from simple leash work to complicated work in harness in congested city conditions. Compatibility and understanding between the trainer and dog is essential. All of the training is carried out under normal street conditions. Great stress is laid upon the importance of the handler establishing control of his dog through the use of his voice and, whilst physical corrections in the shape of a shake or jerk on the harness or leash may be necessary, the majority of control is achieved through the use of the voice.

The light leather harness transmits movement from the dog to the person who, with experience, can accurately interpret these movements to tell where the dog is moving, and whether it is moving up or down small inclines or steps. Obstacle avoidance is learned by a process of habituation, reinforced from time to time by the use of artificial obstacles. Similarly, traffic training is reinforced by the use of training vehicles. In this, vehicles can be made to approach the dog in a way which would be difficult to repeat under natural conditions. Cars can be made to come rapidly out of blind alleyways, reverse quickly over a footpath, or come on the wrong side of the road, all of which are situations which the dog must be capable of handling, should such an emergency arise. Whilst various methods of traffic training have been used over the years, some involving establishing a fear in the dog, and others using the noise of the car's engine as a signal that the dog must stop, the present method of traffic training is that the appearance of a vehicle at a particular distance from the dog is merely a signal that it must stop. There is no fear involved. However, with traffic conditions becoming extremely complicated in most cities, it is considered wise for guide dog owners to accept the help of sighted people in order to safely cross very busy or multiple-lane roads.

Whilst the guide dog could never be claimed to be an answer to blindness, or a substitute for sight, a report carried out by the Research Centre of the New York School of Social Work (Finestone et al 1960) shows quite clearly that people using guide dogs travel more effectively, more widely, and more safely than any other group of blind people using any other type of aid.

After an instructor has completed the training of a group of dogs, four blind people from amongst those who have applied for training will be selected to work under his direction as a single class at the school. The instruction period for the blind person will last approximately four weeks. During the first few days the instructor works with the blind person without using the dog. This enables the blind person to practice, as it were, on the trainer rather than the dog, and allows the instructors to make a final assessment of the type of dog which is most likely to be suitable for any one individual.

A number of factors are taken into account in this assessment, including the person's height and weight ratio, balance, speed of reaction, and assessment of capability of voice control. The blind person's general orientation and some broad temperamental factors are also considered. The temperament of man and dog should complement each other, rather than mirror each other. The man's home and work situation and the type of work, the type of area in which he lives, and his future needs, are all important in the final assessment of which dog is most likely to be most suitable for him.

Blind people working in noisy factories must obviously have dogs which can tolerate noise. A switchboard operator will need a dog which will be content to lie happily at his side for long periods during the day. Other blind people who travel more widely will require dogs showing different degrees of initiative.

From the outset, the blind people are instructed how to handle and care for their dogs. Evening discussions and lectures are designed to help the blind person develop a deeper understanding of the animal with which he is working, and the subjects would include the dog's senses, principles of animal training and the general care of the dog.

The training of the dog and man is carefully graduated. By the end of the course each blind person will have had experience in handling his dog on public transport, in city stores, would know how to negotiate stairs and lifts, will be accustomed to finding his way in and out of shops and cafes, and be introduced to a wide range of experiences. These experiences, combined with the technical knowledge they have gained in the actual handling of the dog and the theoretical knowledge of animal behaviour, are all designed to enable the blind person to continue his experience in working with his dog in the greatest safety and to his greatest advantage.

On completion of the four weeks training at the National Guide Dogs and Mobility Training Centre, the blind person and dog leave, a competent team, but as yet only at the fringe of what it is potentially possible to achieve. The final achievement is largely dependant on the ability, desires and needs of the blind person.

The Association keeps in contact with each one of its guide dog owners after leaving the Training Centre. If necessary, instructors visit guide dog owners from time to time.

The relationship between canine and human temperaments is a rather fascinating subject on which, unfortunately, all too little is presently known. That the temperament of the human being can affect the behaviour of an animal is, of course, a common observation. However, it may be of interest to comment on some of the observations of the staff at the National Guide Dog Centre over the past years.

Although great care is taken over the selection of a dog for a particular individual, the results are not always in accordance with what may have been predicted. For instance, there have been a number of cases where a technically competent blind person (and by technically, it is meant that the person would have good orientation, balance, rapid speed of reaction, good intelligence) would have been expected to make an excellent team with his guide dog. However, in spite of this apparent competence, nothing more than average work was achieved, because of the lack of this rather ethereal ability of a man to, as it were, reach the dog and to stimulate a response, no real bond develops between the two.

Occasionally, the converse applies when individuals of rather below average technical ability, have achieved great success with their dogs because of a uniquely strong bond of confidence and communication between the two. In some cases it has been known for the physical well-being of one to affect the physical well-being of the other.

If we had more knowledge of, or more accurate means of assessing, these qualities in the human being — what, in fact, makes some dogs respond well to some people and not to others — then perhaps our training programme could be made even more effective.

The psychological approaches to our work are, therefore,

both important and practical. Speaking of these psychological aspects leads to the consideration of our staff training programme. Father Carroll (1961), in his book "Blindness" which is now almost a standard text book for many workers in the field, stresses the importance of mobility instructors being well trained themselves, and this emphasis on staff training has been repeated in the Comstac Report (1966) in the United States, which has produced standards for strengthened services in the whole field of welfare for the blind. At the National Guide Dog Training Centre each of our instructors goes through a three year training course before being qualified to instruct both guide dogs and blind people. It has been said that three years is an excessively long time to learn to train dogs. Perhaps this is so, but it is not an excessively long time to learn how to adequately and carefully instruct handicapped people and this, in fact, is the essence of our work. It is much more of a human instructional situation than a dog training situation.

As our future staff needs have to be met from within our own resources, we have a continual programme of staff training to meet the ever increasing demands of the services of the Association.

The selective breeding programme is an area in which a great deal more knowledge is required on the general factors involved in particular temperamental qualities. Konrad Lorenz (1963) speaks of the meaning of the various facial expressions in the dog, and these expressions do seem to be fairly generally applicable and rather constant. However, the whole bodily attitude of the dog can also provide information on its immediate and probable future behaviour and, whilst Scott (1958) considers these attitudes convey only simple information, the information is, nevertheless, more valuable. A handler cannot apply effective training methods unless he is able to correctly interpret the attitudes of the dog which he may observe. The difference in a dog's attitude between when it is suspicious, or when it is purely attracted towards some object or scent, may at first seem very similar. However, on closer examination there are many points of difference in these attitudes, which to the skilled observer will show quite clearly the different underlying reasons for apparently similar behaviour.

Again, little is known about what is commonly called "homing ability" in dogs. This has considerable application in guide dog work and, whilst there are many cases on record remembering particular doorways, gates and places, in spite of the fact that they may not have been near that place for over twelve months, we are not sure, in fact, what actually stimulates this memory. Is it some form of homing ability? Is it, perhaps, something more like a simple place memory? Or does the dog get unconscious cues from the owner as he nears a particular place? The avenues for research in this work are still wide and numerous.

Whilst present needs are being met within the framework of this guide dog organisation, the challenges ahead of us indicate that we need to constantly look wider and deeper into all aspects of our work, and we look forward with increasing anticipation to the continued development of our work in the future.

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